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ABSTRACT

Recent directions in ethnographic study of classroom interaction are surveyed for the help they can give to an analysis of classroom language and conversation. Many studies emphasize that children's responses to school tasks are directly influenced by values learned at home and that these factors add to the complexity of communication in the classroom. Studies of the communication process are reviewed for their contribution to the exploration of the relationships between words, vocal and kinesic systems, and the interpretive procedures of participants in classroom conversation. Particular attention is given to studies of acquired contextualization conventions, that is, non-lexical and non-grammatical signaling of communicative intent, and to the way those conventions lead to interpretive differences in ethnically mixed settings or in interaction between children and adults. An example of an episode in a classroom is given to illustrate these conventions and the misinterpretation that can arise. It is suggested that the factors discussed may begin to provide a solution to the problem of what it is about school and classroom environment that leads some children to learn and others to fall behind. (AMH)

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## BEYOND ETHNOGRAPHY: SOME USES OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS FOR UNDERSTANDING CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS

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# BEYOND ETHNOGRAPHY: SOME USES OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS FOR UNDERSTANDING CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS*

John J. Gumperz
Jenny Cook-Gumperz

In this paper we will survey some recent directions in the ethnographic study of classroom interaction and then suggest that the analysis of language and conversations in classrooms can provide us with both a perspective and some evidence for solutions to problems of urban schools and children.

Clearly *schooling* as such is not the sole cause of educational failure. Society has its own powerful selection mechanisms that may override even the effect of many classroom reforms (Ogbu, 1978). Yet it is also true that if we look beyond the macro trends to individual careers, many students of minority background do quite well under conditions that lead others to fail. To understand modern educational problems, we need to know how and by what mechanisms cultural, political, and economic factors interact with specific teaching contexts to affect the acquisition of knowledge and skill. That is, we need to provide for the linking of explanations at the level of institutional processes of cultural transmissions right through to the understanding of the details of the daily practice of teachers and children in classrooms.

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Interesting initial insights into what takes place in the classroom come from the early autobiographically oriented writings of teachers themselves, such as Holt (1964), Kohl (1967), and Kozol (1967). These writings pointed to the contrast between the official descriptions of curricula and program goals and what actually takes place in the classroom. They provided an impetus to the increasing awareness of the need for ethnographic--that is, situationally specific--descriptions of the processes of conducting lessons and organizing classrooms as environments for learning within many different school situations. Our growing understanding of the classroom as a social environment can largely be attributed to these ethnographic studies. We will now summarize briefly some findings for research on classrooms as social environments.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE FOR THE CLASSROOM AS A SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Some of the most revealing of the recent classroom ethnographies concentrate on the contrast between home and classroom learning experiences. In one of the first and most influential of these, Philips (1972) compared patterns of classroom participation among reservation-reared Native American children and among non-Native American children. She found that the Native American children participated more enthusiastically and performed more effectively in classroom contexts, which minimized the obligation of individual students to perform in public contexts and the need for teachers to control performance styles and correct errors. Preferences for these contexts reflected the kinds of relationships that the children were accustomed to on the reservation, where lateral net-

works of children in groups were more important than hierarchical role-differentiated networks of adults and children.

Philips attributes the generally poor school performance of Native American children to the far greater frequency in conventional classrooms of conditions which, for them, create unfamiliar and threatening frameworks of participation. She proposed the notion of "participant structure" to characterize the constellation of norms, mutual rights, and obligations that shape social relationships, determine participants' perceptions about what goes on, and influence learning. Philips' findings are supported by a number of other ethnographic investigations where learning or failure to learn have been attributed to discontinuities between the participant structures of the home and community and those of the school: Native Americans (Cazden and John, 1971; Dumont, 1972), Afro-Americans (Heath, 1977; Kochman, 1972; Labov, 1972), Hawaiians (Boggs, 1972), rural Appalachian whites (Heath, 1977), and working class British (Bernstein, 1974) have all been studied.

These studies highlight the point that children's responses to school tasks are directly influenced by values and presuppositions learned in the home. They demonstrate, moreover, that classroom resources or social groupings of teachers and students are not the primary determinants of learning. What is important is what is *communicated* in the classroom as a result of a complex process of interaction between educational goals, background knowledge, and what various participants over time perceive as taking place.

How can we measure or study this communication process? The bulk of the evaluational measures of classroom performance that

have been used over the last few decades in such systems as the Flanders System of Interaction Analysis (1967) build on the tradition of small group studies developed by Bales *et al.* (1951).

These methods have been valuable in pointing to important differences between suburban and inner-city classrooms. Leacock (1969) who used interaction analysis in connection with her ethnographic work found teachers in inner-city environments to be more controlling, more critical, and less accepting of children's learning errors than their suburban colleagues. She argues that since classrooms are part of schools and that since teachers operate within a system of educational knowledge and ideology, this ideology is bound to influence teachers' strategies. That is, the prevailing sociocultural attitudes affect teachers' evaluations in specific classroom events; and although these appear momentary in any observation, if they influence recorded evaluations, they are then fed back into the bureaucratically constructed career profile of individual children. Further impressive evidence for the importance of teachers' socially conditioned expectations influencing evaluations and in determining individuals' progress is given by Rist (1970). In this way we can begin to see how social factors and the climate of opinion *outside* of the classroom may enter into the classroom learning process.

But useful as small group measures are in demonstrating that cultural differences do create problems in the classroom, evaluation measures have been unable to account for the full effects of classroom environments. One difficulty is that the *coder's inter-*

*pretation of behavior* rather than the *actual* behavior is the basis for analysis. When interpretations of behavior differ as they do in most ethnically mixed classrooms, there is no way to guard against cultural bias in evaluating performance and to distinguish between differences in cultural style and ability. Without reference to the actual process of interaction, nothing can be said about how participants react to and make sense out of particular tasks.

Some qualitative insights into everyday processes of classroom interaction come from the micro-ethnographic analyses of Erickson (1977) and his students (Florio, 1978). Among other things, this work has shown that it cannot be assumed, as earlier small group analysts had assumed, that the classroom constitutes an undifferentiated structure where teacher and child interact as individuals. Interaction processes are at work within each setting that lead to subgroup formation and determine the contexts that guide and channel behavior.

The value of these methods is that they provide replicable ways of discovering types of behavior that are not ordinarily commented on but which nevertheless guide interaction and reveal the unstated conventions that may influence teacher evaluations of student performance. Erickson's study of nursery schools, for example, shows that in the course of a typical class session children move sequentially through different types of participant structures. Some of these have established names such as "show and tell" or "story telling"; others do not. But each involves different modes of cooperation and learning as well as rules for the evaluation of behavior and for the interpretation of what goes

on. Children must learn what these structures are; they must know how transitions between structures are signaled and what behavioral strategies are required to gain the teacher's attention or to secure cooperation of the peer group. Knowledge of strategies appropriate to these structures is a precondition for obtaining access to learning.

McDermott (1978) applied similar techniques of nonverbal analysis to an investigation of the process of getting turns at reading in an urban elementary school. He was able to show that because of the organization of the students into separate sub-groups and because of the teacher's definition of the lower group as requiring more explicit and consistent direction, much of the teacher's time with that group was spent looking around the room to ward off possible interruptions and similar kinds of control behavior.

McDermott's findings recall those of an earlier informal ethnographic account (Lewis, 1970), which described a reading lesson in which children seated in an informal group arrangement were successively called on to read sentences in a story. When a Black child failed to make a phonetic distinction between the vowels in "pin" and "pen," the teacher, who had recently been to a lecture on Black dialect and had learned that failure to make this distinction is a feature of the dialect of many low reading Black children and "proper pronunciation" is a precondition to reading, wrote the two words on the board and asked the child to pronounce the two words in isolation. When the child still did not make the distinction, she removed the child from

the group and asked him to join another low reader in the corner of the room to practice the letters. In the minutes that followed this incident, the two children who had been singled out took a reading game and started to work with it enthusiastically, making a considerable amount of noise, whereupon the teacher said: "Stop playing and start working."

In interpreting what went on, it must be noted that the linguistic fact at issue, the failure to make a distinction between "pin" and "pen," is characteristic of approximately 80 percent of Black children and 40 percent of White children in California. In that very group, in fact, a White child also did not distinguish between the two vowels; but, perhaps because of the association of ethnicity with the phonetic feature involved, the teacher failed to notice this. In any case, it seems doubtful that the child who was asked to leave the reading group understood the reason for being singled out; the effect of this incident was to remove the child from situations from which he might have learned.

In each of these examples, something is being conveyed either through words, movements, or gestures, which, when interpreted by participants in relation to their background social knowledge, serves to channel interaction. Our special task, if we are to provide the linking spoken of in the beginning of this paper, is to explore further the relationships between words, vocal and kinesic systems, and the interpretive procedures of participants. We know that children, teachers, and outside observers may reach different understandings depending on their social experience and

their knowledge of the signals that participants use. It is for these reasons that we need to know more about the process by which specific social meanings and conventions are created through conversational exchanges and to explore more fully the uses of language in the classroom.

Micro-ethnographic studies of non-verbal behaviors are highly successful in revealing previously unnoticed features and unspoken norms of subgroup formation and social presuppositions that affect classroom learning; but we also need to know more about specific patterns and conventions of *verbal* usage.

## LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

Perhaps the best known and the most recent systems for analyzing classroom language are those of Bellack *et al.* (1966) and of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975); both of these systems propose that the structure of discourse in the classroom arises from sequential constraints on selection such that one type of act is likely to follow or be followed by others of specific types. That is, verbal interactions among teachers and students in a classroom are conceptualized as moves in a Wittgensteinian language game that follows implicit rules of behavior. Further, the Sinclair and Coulthard system has finer detail in that it specifies the role of both grammatical forms and content in the functioning of these classroom moves.

Though an important step forward, both of these analyses are limited by the fact that they are based on data collected in experimental situations where teachers were instructed to teach predetermined lessons and what was examined was their actual lec-

tures. The social significance of classroom speech is evaluated in terms of profiles of utterance functions. Yet since function is taken as a given, what is in fact studied is the significance of teachers' and students' moves in relation to the stated lesson goal.

To explore the ways in which social meanings are generated and an interpretation of specific sequences of words and actions is given within the flow of ordinary classroom talk, it is perhaps necessary to take an approach that starts with the central issue of attributing meaning and intent to specific utterances both in and outside the classroom. Such an approach, as that taken by the linguistic pragmatists to the study of adult-child verbal interaction, requires that classroom talk be seen as functioning in its essential forms as any other conversational exchange. The linguistic pragmatist approach builds on the speech acts theorists' distinction between propositional content and illocutionary force to focus on participants' interpretation of message intent (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan, 1977; Garvey, 1975; Keenan and Schieffelin, 1976). The focus of the analysis here is on what Searle (1975) calls "utterers' meaning," that is, what a speaker intends to achieve by an utterance. By taking account of the linguistic and extra-linguistic settings in which a sentence occurs, it can be shown that speakers and listeners regularly build on context-dependent presuppositions to arrive at interpretations that are often quite different from their literal meanings. Given this approach, if a teacher is heard to make a statement such as "I don't see any hands" when a question has been

asked and several children begin to call out, this statement can be analyzed as a request for a show of hands and a directive to be quiet.

Pragmatic analyses explain some highly significant aspects of the conduct of conversations, but they assume that linguistic mechanisms involved in interpretation of speakers' intent can be analyzed entirely in terms of grammar and lexicon, and that content can be determined on the basis of extra-linguistic information. When, as is the case in a classroom, setting and participants are constant, it is assumed that all conversationalists share one definition of the situation. There is no attempt to account for the changing nature of participant structures and for the role of verbal and nonverbal signs in signaling these changes.

Furthermore, the major problem of urban education, i.e., the problem of differential learning resulting from the varying effects that similar teaching strategies and classroom conversational sequences may have on students of a different background, is not dealt with. This aspect was taken up in a recently completed year-long study by Mehan (1978), which focuses directly on participant structures. Courtney Cazden served as the teacher in an ethnically-mixed urban classroom and in the course of her daily activities was able to build a number of interesting experiments into her teaching schedule. One of the main concerns of this study was to show how small group participant structures are reflected in conversational practices and to elucidate teachers' and students' discourse strategies. Among the important findings cited in preliminary reports are that while children and adults

have different ways of formulating what are functionally similar tasks, teachers on the whole rely more on lexical specificity while children rely more on context; these differences do not result in differences in efficiency of communication or teaching efficiency. (For similar findings, see Gumperz and Herasimchuk, 1972; Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1976.)

Mehan takes an interactive approach that concentrates on the mechanisms through which turns at speaking are assigned and verbal interaction is controlled. The theory builds on the ethnomethodological studies of conversation (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1969; Sacks *et al.*, 1974). What is examined are constraints on sequencing of utterances as they appear in such naturally occurring instructional routines as teaching the content of a story, teaching problem solving strategies, and giving instructions.

Ethnomethodological studies of conversation have made a basic contribution to sociolinguistics by demonstrating that speaking is not simply a matter of individuals saying what they want, when they want to say it. Sacks and Schegloff (1975) have pointed out that conversations of all kinds are characterized by: (1) adjacency pairs such as question-answer, greeting-greeting, request-acknowledgement, where a first utterance creates a necessary condition for the second; and (2) that such intersentential ties constitute an important resource for conversational management. Following a similar line of reasoning, Mehan (1974) demonstrates that instructional talk differs from casual conversation in that it is based on a tripartite structure of initiation-response-evaluation.

Findings such as these clearly show that participant structures are in large part created and sustained through discourse conventions. Like non-verbal signs, these discourse conventions are rarely overtly discussed and must be learned indirectly through active participation in the instructional process. We can assume that, to the extent that learning is a function of the ability to sustain interaction, the child's ability to control and utilize these conventions is an important determinant of educational success. But focus on the structural underpinnings of verbal interaction is not enough. We must go on to determine how this discourse knowledge is acquired and practiced in specific educational contexts and how differential practices can result in educational evaluations that are based on communicative misunderstandings. To do this, we require a fuller theory of the processes of communication.

One way to accomplish this goal is to apply methods that build on the linguistic pragmatists' distinction between propositional content, literal meaning and illocutionary force, or intended effect to analyze conversational management in classroom activities. Work carried out in Berkeley during the last few years has begun to develop methods for analyzing verbal strategies and to isolate features of the verbal message that are rhythmically coordinated with nonverbal behavior and that also reflect the operation of participant structures (Bennett *et al.*, 1976; Gumperz and Herasimchuk, 1975; Gumperz, 1976). When applied to classroom interaction, these linguistic measures of verbal behavior can serve not only to simplify analytical techniques but can also enable

us to establish a more direct relationship between the interpretation of specific utterances and what goes on in the classroom.

The initial problem that any potential conversationalist faces is to create what Goffman (1974) has called conversational involvement, that is, to gain others' attention and to sustain their participation in talk. To do so participants must at least in very general terms--explicitly or implicitly--agree on what the interaction is about. That is, even though they may differ on specific details of what is meant at any one time, they must at least share some basic expectations as to where the talk is going or what is likely to follow. Without this sharedness, interactants are likely to lose interest, interactions tend to be brief or perfunctory, and productive exchanges are unlikely to result.

When participants are questioned or analysts are asked to describe a conversational sequence, they are likely to resort to descriptive labels such as: A was *telling a story* about X, *explaining* why he/she did X, *teaching* B how to do X, *giving a lecture* about X, *interrogating* B about X, or *chatting* with B about X. Such descriptive statements are generalizable in terms of what ethnographers of communication have called speech events (Gumperz and Hymes, 1972) or psychologists and discourse analysts call scripts, frames, or schemata (Tannen, 1979; Schank and Abelson, 1977). One might be tempted, therefore, to argue that the study of conversation must begin by describing and listing these broader interactional units and then go on to state how, under what conditions they are used, and what styles of speaking they

require. This type of description presents no serious problem in the case of bounded events such as ritual performances, formal lectures, or even for staged experimental classroom lessons; but everyday conversation does not take the form of such set routines. The very labels we use are often quite different from what we really intend. If I say to someone, "Let's have a chat sometime," I may not intend to engage in the activity of casual and leisurely talk implied by the term "chatting." Nor is it possible to predict what activity is being enacted simply by specifying what is known beforehand of the extra-linguistic setting and giving the social characteristics and personal goals of participants and revealing the content of what is being said (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1976). Verbal interactions of all kinds, formal and informal, rarely take the form of set, sequentially specifiable routines. Most talk is characterized by frequent and often quite subtle shifts in focus and maintenance of conversational involvement requiring that participants be able to recognize and follow these shifts.

The theoretical notion on which our analysis rests is the concept of conversational cooperation: the situated process by which participants in a conversation assess other participants' intentions and on which they base their responses. Conversational cooperation is commonly understood to refer to the assumptions that conversationalists must make about each others' contributions and to the conversational principles they rely on in judging intent. It is also evident, however, that cooperation implies joint action involving what students of nonverbal communication

have called "speakership and listenership signals." This process involves not only communication through the use of words in their literal or illocutionary meaning but builds upon the construction across time of negotiated and situationally specific conventions for understanding. Interpretation of actual sequences also relies upon the speaker's and listener's knowledge of how to conduct and interpret live performances. The features previously referred to as paralinguistic--intonation, stress, and rhythms and contrastive shifts of phonetic values--are all ways of conveying meaning that add to or alter the meaning of semantic choices.

To the extent that we can talk about conversations being governed and controlled by shared expectations, we must assume that these expectations are signaled and sharedness is negotiated as part of the interaction itself. Such linguistic signaling of communicative intent involves signs that go beyond what is usually included in the linguists' analyses of grammar and lexicon. For this process we will use the term *contextualization convention* to refer to the non-lexical and non-grammatical, yet nevertheless linguistic, cues involved in conversational management.

One way in which the contextualization conventions function is to serve as guide posts or measuring sticks for the progress of the conversational interaction. We use our knowledge of grammar, lexicon, contextualization conventions, and whatever background information we have about settings and participants to decide on what activity is being signaled or to establish likely communicative goals and outcomes. We then build on these predictions to identify the communicative intent that underlies par-

ticular utterances. Contextualization conventions channel interpretations in one direction or another. The basic assumption is that something is being communicated. What is at issue is how it is to be interpreted. The judgments involved are contingent judgments; they are either confirmed or disproved by what happens subsequently. If they are confirmed, our expectations are reinforced; if they are disconfirmed, we try to recode what we have heard and change our expectations of goals, outcomes, or speaker's intent.

Contextualization conventions are acquired as a result of a speaker's actual interactive experience, that is, as a result of an individual's participation in particular networks of relationships (Gumperz, 1976). Where these networks differ, as they do in ethnically mixed settings, or in interaction between children and adults, varying conventions arise (Cook-Gumperz and Corsaro, 1978), as in the following example:

> Cora and Sally are standing at a play table on which are some scrap paper and a stapler. They are working at stapling together pieces of paper. They have taken over the table from another child who had been using it as a police station and had referred to the table as the police desk. The girls had come to share the table, saying "We are the teachers"; after a short while, the other child left. Marty, another child, comes along and sits at the table as the stapling episode begins:
>
> 1. S: (touching table, as M comes up) *This is our desk. Nobody can come in our office.* (M sits down opposite the teacher)
>
> 2. C: (taking no notice of M) *No, we show the kids, right.*

3. S: *We working.*

4. C: *Yea.*

5. S: *Nobody can come in.* (C and S look at each other while C replies)

6. C: *No.*

7. S: *Then we...teaching* (as M reaches for the stapler)

8. S: *NO. He not can't come in.*

9. C: *No, no, we're teachers.*

Note how the game develops naturally. There is no introduction such as "let's play school," no attempt to formulate the activity verbally by saying "we're playing teachers," just simple statements such as "This is our desk" (1), "We working" (3), etc. The fact that C responds to S's shift from conversational tone and copies her declarative style is the only signal we have that the activity of playing teachers has been agreed upon. The activity, moreover, lasts only as long as the same prosodic style is maintained. Once it is recognized what game is being played, this recognition feeds back into an interpretation of the component messages. For example, the word "no" occurs several times, each time with different situated meaning. In (2) and (6) it is simply a response suggesting agreement with S's preceding statement. The loud "NO" (8) marks a stylistic departure and signals a command addressed to M so that the meaning is "don't." While in (9) the return to the prosody and rhythm of (6) and (7) suggests that "no" is meant as game talk. Similarly the fact that "nobody can come in" receives the same prosodic treatment as "we're teachers" identifies it as game structuring contextualization convention. The teaching game is also built up through a semantic tie between the use of "our office" and the statement later on "we teaching" into which the "Nobody can come in" fits as a statement about being a teacher in the office. The idea of being teachers is gradually developed from the two children's entry into the situation as they took over the play table from another child.

In this short episode we can perhaps begin to see that there is nothing about these contextualization conventions that is totally unfamiliar to adults; the point is that the frequency with which they are used and the signaling load they carry are likely to be unfamiliar to adults. When adults use such intonation and semantic ties, they are likely to surround them with qualifying phrases and other lexical acknowledgments that make up a different situated use of the same practices and hence have a different communicated value.

The question we must finally ask, then, is what do these subtle and, until recently, apparently marginal differences of communicative and interpretive ability mean for the child in the classroom? When, because of our differences in social background, we do not recognize the meaning potential of an utterance sequence we are usually, in the immediate situation, forced to make a judgment of communicative intent without realizing the extent or consequence of our lack of knowledge. Across time and given the realities of classroom situations, if such differences continue, these interpretive processes can easily lead to culturally biased evaluations of performance, especially in ethnically-mixed classrooms where interpretive problems arising from developmental differences in contextualization conventions are compounded by ethnic differences. In this way, we can begin to show how verbal communication can be analyzed to find interactional explanations for some of the problems of teachers in classrooms that Rist, (1970), Leacock, (1969), and others have identified.

These problems can, in fact, be reformulated, for although the language differences looked at in terms of linguistic values are small and the processes of conversational interpretation are subtle differences is powerfully influential. These factors begin to provide a solution to the long unsolved problem of what it is about the school and classroom environment that leads some children to learn and others to fall behind. That factors other than isolated differences in language or cultural background are at issue has been demonstrated by the research of the 1960s and early 1970s. The hypotheses tested then, which derived from cultural deprivation and from linguistic deficit and difference models, were found to be incapable of explaining the failure of minority children to achieve in urban schools (Baratz and Baratz, 1970; Labov, 1969; Melmed, 1971; Simons, 1974, 1976; Simons and Johnson, 1974).

We now know that what the child learns in school is determined by a combination of forces. Ogbu's work (1978), for example, has convincingly shown that the goals, policies, and practices of society at large, the opportunities and role models that society provides for individuals of minority background, significantly affect the motivation to learn. But while the motivation to learn is undoubtedly influenced by the world outside of the school, the daily process of communication difficulties within the classroom and the stress that lack of support for personal and familial communication patterns generate for a growing child can produce a situation of progressive detachment from school activities and

from school achievement:* that is, unless the myriad of small but significant communicative features making up a classroom environment is better understood.

*Perhaps the most suggestive evidence for the role of classroom environments comes from statistics on school performance which show that the gap in average achievement level between middle-class children and poor or minority children increases as a function of grade level (Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, 1964; Katz, 1971).

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